

They're coming!'

The little boy runs down the cobbled lanes of the small town at the edge of the harbour. He keeps brushing his wet blond hair from his eyes but it's far too long and keeps getting in the way.

He's never run this fast before.

He never used to have to, in the olden days.

When he was four, or five.

He keeps shouting as he runs past the general store. People open their doors and slam them shut as they hear his cries. The unwelcome sound of locks and bolts follow the boy, and they echo across the near-silent streets.

'They're coming! Tell everyone!' He has to stop, just for a second, or he'll fall. He did that once last week. He grazed his knee. It hurt.

He stops to catch his breath and hugs the post which lights the small street. Not far now. It's slightly downhill – that'll make it easier.

There's a crash behind him and he spins round, transfixed by the sight. He's got to keep moving, but he just stands there staring at the impossible. Another crash shocks him to his senses and he starts to run again, faster than before, towards the end of the street. He shouts and shouts again as he gets closer. Someone, somewhere, starts screaming – but only for a second, as if they suddenly realised it was the worst thing they could do. The boy turns back again to check what happened. It's an unnatural thing, hearing a scream stop suddenly dead. As he does so he trips, his knees hit the cobbles first and tears well up in his eyes.

Big boy, James. You're a big boy. Nana'd say. Be a big boy. Pick yourself up now. Don't cry. Don't scream. You know he'll get you if you scream. It'll all be fine.

His knees are stinging, but he's a big boy so gets up again. He doesn't cry and doesn't scream. There isn't the time. He stumbles round the corner of the lane and there it is.

The little pub at the end of the lane sits, squat and narrow, waiting for him. A dim yellow glow peers out of the windows and

lands on the wet cobbles outside. The light reminds him of home, and smoke rises from the small chimney atop the slanted terracotta roof. So close.

The boy runs for five, maybe ten more seconds, until he finally reaches the door, turns the iron handle and bursts in.

‘They’re coming! They’re nearly here! I was told to warn...’

He falls onto the floor in the middle of the startled company inside and shuts up. The boy looks around. In his short but eventful life he’d never seen anything of the sort. He’d read the story books, of course – well, those with the short words – but the scene before him was just like the pictures.

Everyone is... different, and strange; magical but terrifying at the same time.

All chatter stops, and the monsters – for James thinks they are monsters – turn to look at him as one. The man behind the bar, who was cleaning a glass, puts it down.

‘What did you say, young man?’

James struggles to catch his breath as he kneels on his grazed knees, afraid to speak in front of everyone. He points at the door and whispers, ‘They’re coming.’

The man puts his towel down on the bar. He looks at his friend to his left, a strange man with strange orange skin, and nods sadly.

‘OK, everybody. You heard the lad. That’s Time. Everybody out, please.’

There’s a beat, while the Landlord’s words sink in. Then, as if a power switch has been suddenly turned after a dark night, there’s movement. Everywhere. All at once. Everyone around the boy slams their glasses back and down onto the tables. As they hurry out of the door, they turn and nod at the Landlord who acknowledges each one in turn as they leave. He says something to a monster made of rock still sitting calmly at the bar; the tallest thing James has ever seen. The monster shakes his head and jabs a fat stone-like finger into the bar. The Landlord points at the boy, and the monster’s shoulders slump. He turns and walks over to James, picking him up under his arm in one smooth action and

taking no notice of the boy's frightened kicking. As with the others, when the rock reaches the door he turns to the Landlord.

'You take care,' the rock-man says.

The Landlord nods, as he nodded to the others. As he's carried out, back down the little cobbled lane, James stops struggling, takes one more look behind him, and sees the Landlord looking out after them. But all too soon they leave him behind.

Without knowing why, James starts to cry.

The Landlord watches the last of his customers flee down the little lane, turns his head the other way and sees what James told him was coming. He slowly closes the door and walks back inside to face his two remaining friends. He reaches under the bar and takes out a small leather jacket, which he passes to his barman. He says one word.

'Go.'

The hairs on the orange skinned barman's arms rise up in defence.

'No, yer not facin' them lot on yer own.' The Landlord throws the jacket at his friend, who catches it with one hand.

'Go,' the Landlord says again. 'We talked about this – what we'd do. Don't fight me. You need to see tomorrow, to show the new guy the ropes. Remember what it was like for me and be that man again. Teach him what he'll need to survive where I couldn't. Go.' The barman looks at him, torn, wondering whether to argue. Finally, he turns to the door.

'All right – but don't you think this is it. I'll look after the new lad or lass... whatever or whoever she finds. For you. But only as you asked so nicely and that. Guess I still owe you one.' He turns to the woman standing in the shadows in a doorway behind the bar, making it clear he means what he says. 'Whoever it is, they'd better be tough.' He nods to the Landlord, his nod is returned, and he too leaves.

The Landlord crosses to the woman in the shadows. From outside comes a faint roaring noise, like a storm heard through the mouth of a tunnel. There isn't much time.

'We knew this was likely,' he says.

She edges forward, keeping to the dark. 'Not this soon. We're not prepared enough.'

'That's a shame,' he mutters, almost to himself. He walks over to the front door and places a large iron key in the lock. He turns it, bolting the door shut.

Safe.

'Go on,' he waves at the woman. 'You too. You know your role in the wider scheme of things. Keep the chain running. Find someone else to keep the link between the Oak and the Dogwood. It's not my job any more. You've got three weeks to find someone, or the Scratching can't be stopped.'

'A new man with a new licence to this place won't stop it. You know that. It'll buy us a week, at most.'

The Landlord shrugs. 'It's a week. Who knows what you can do in a week? The Council trusts your judgement. They know you'll pick someone strong. Now go on. Don't make me bar you like I used to.'

The woman steps back, and edges into the small, dark, corridor leading out to the cellar behind the bar. 'Until the next time,' she says.

'There'll be no next time, Natasha.'

And then he's alone.

He walks to a table, which seems grown from the walls of the building itself, and calmly sits down. But as the roaring outside grows in volume his breath starts to get shorter and shorter. His fingers start to tap on the wood, drumming and drumming to distract from the noise outside – until it suddenly stops and all is quiet once more.

'Come on, Nat,' he whispers to himself. 'Someone strong. Someone better than I was.'

The silence is haunting and oppressive.

And short lived.

The door crashes open, the Landlord jumps but stays seated, fingers incessantly drumming, faster and faster. He thought he'd

be calm; he'd practised being calm. But as he sees The Man With The Crab-Like Feet stride confidently and purposefully towards him, eyes like tar and fingers like needles, the calm flees as he knew it would.

And as The Man With The Crab-Like Feet starts to grip his chest he screams, and at once hates and curses himself for screaming.

For Screaming starts the Scratching.

And Scratching starts the Night.

*For Scratching starts the Scratching,
Starts the Binding Brothers' Light.*